STRENGTHENING OUR TIES
WHERE WE AGREE
WHERE WE DIFFER

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This is an important and historically significant moment for American Christians and Jews to be talking to one another, not about the weather or the fact that pitchers and catchers reported to spring training today, but about our faith, that commitment deep in our souls that defines us as nothing else quite does; talking about the common ground on which we stand as Christians and Jews and about the particularities of our faith that distinguish and differentiate us.

I am grateful to Michael Sternfield for his leadership and his vision expressed so graciously in the hospitality of Congregation Sinai this evening but also throughout the year.

I am grateful to my colleague Dana Ferguson and to all of you for your commitment to this project.

You are important to us. Whether you know it or not, you helped us in a very substantive way to define who we are and who we aspire to be in the community.

Not long after I arrived at Fourth Church 19 years ago, Rabbi Howard Berman, Congregation Sinai, Hyde Park, called, introduced himself, and made a request. Members of Congregation Sinai living in our neighborhood wanted a place close to home to hold Sabbath services instead of having to make the Friday evening drive to Hyde Park.

Would we be willing to let a group of Congregation Sinai members meet in our building for Sabbath services?

Well, we had never done anything quite like that before. Presbyterians can get a little quirky about their worship space. I suspect not a lot differently from Jewish people. Is it appropriate for people to use our “sacred space” for worship if these people don’t believe exactly the same thing we believe? Will we have to rearrange the furniture, remove symbols of our particular faith? Etc., etc.

We had a good discussion and a strong decision was made. Yes, indeed, we want to do this. We need to do it.

It worked very well. Rabbi Berman called again.

Another question: our members are liking it so much they'd like to have some refreshments. Now you're talking our language. Church and food—at least coffee—pretty much go together in the Presbyterian lexicon. Of course.

And then came the plans to move Congregation Sinai to our neighborhood and another call: can we use your Sanctuary for High Holy Days? It was an easy decision: of course.

You are important to us. We are a better Presbyterian church because of our relationship.

So thank you for your hospitality and for standing together with us on common ground. We are delighted to be here.

Sometimes we use the phrase "the Judeo-Christian tradition" to describe our faith, our religious ethos. The phase has fallen out of favor these days in the scholarly community for several reasons. One, it seems to imply that there are no differences between Judaism and Christianity in any way that matters. Two, it excludes other religious traditions, particularly the third Abrahamic religion, Islam.

But I still like it. It says something important about my particular religion, my faith family. It is not simply Christian, as if it were invented 2,000 years ago.

It is more than that. It is in a very real sense, a sense many Christians and I suspect many Jews as well do not understand or acknowledge, a Judeo-Christian tradition.

So first, a little history. I asked Dana if she thought I should talk about history, specifically our particular Presbyterian history. She told me she thought I should and besides, she said, most Presbyterians don't understand it either.

Judaism is our family. Before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, and the events of his life and death in what is today Israel, mostly around Galilee and ending in Jerusalem, before that there is only Judaism. Our faith ancestors are the same as yours. We have the same "root," Paul said.

The literature from that time—what we used to call B.C., "Before Christ," and now more helpfully refer to as BCE—is Hebrew literature, Jewish scripture. It is holy and authoritative for us: the Old or First Testament, which is another word for Covenant:

The Pentatuch
The books of history—Joshua, Judges, Kings, Chronicles
The Psalter
The Wisdom Literature—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes.
The Prophets, Major and Minor

It is sacred to us, authoritative: we study it, read it in worship; we read and sing the psalms. We added a New Testament: Gospels, History, Letters, Apocalyptic.

The first Christians were Jews all of them, although it is not exactly accurate even to use the term Christian, because they did not. Jesus was a Jew. So were Peter, James, John—all his disciples; so was Paul and all the early Christian missionaries.

Jesus continued in his Jewish tradition all his life. He was part of the life of the Nazareth synagogue, taught and read there as a young rabbi/teacher. He and his friends had a house in Capernaum and frequented the synagogue there. And, of course, Jerusalem: he was there as an infant and again as a 12-year-old for Passover with his parents, and finally that is where his life ended when he returned to the city as a pilgrim at Passover. He was arrested by the Romans, tried and put to death for sedition.

Afterward his followers came to believe that he was no longer dead but somehow alive and present with them. Inspired by that they returned to their lives, or started to—their lives as Jewish fishermen, tradesmen, carpenters. Gradually they became convinced that Jesus was not only resurrected and wonderfully present with them, but he was also the Messiah, the anointed one promised from the ages.

He made reference to it himself. Whether or not he consciously saw himself as the fulfillment of the Messianic promise, his life was informed by those wonderful images of the Messiah as the chosen one, the suffering one, the Suffering Servant of the prophet Isaiah.

It was their claim that he was the Messiah that put them at odds with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and, indeed, whenever they went back home to their synagogues. But still these followers of Jesus lived with some degree of comfort within Judaism.

It was what happened next that caused the break. Around the perimeters of Judaism, the temple, and the synagogues were curious Gentiles interested

in Judaism, particularly the idea of monotheism. Greek-speaking Romans who knew a little philosophy, Plato's notion that the good is one, not many, found Judaism's monotheism compelling. "God-fearing Gentiles" they were called.

When some of them became further interested in Jesus and his followers and wanted to become part of the Jesus movement, it was simply assumed that the way to do that was to become a Jew, go through the rites of conversion, live by the law, and be circumcised.

Well, a big argument ensued among the Jesus followers, who by now are probably calling themselves Christians after the Greek word for anointed one/Messiah: *Christos.*

Besides, some followers, chiefly Paul and his own disciples, were spreading out throughout the region, miles from Jerusalem, where there were more and more Gentiles, crossing borders into Asia Minor and west to Greek cities of the Roman Empire.

So a huge argument broke out between Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (including Peter and James, Jesus' brother), who maintained that if you wanted to be a Christian you had be a Jew, and advocates of a new way of being Christian, which, while honoring sacred scripture, bypassed the "becoming Jewish first" part. Their leader was Paul.

They actually had a big meeting in Jerusalem. Paul appeared and testified. Peter was there. At the end of the day, the decision was made that Gentiles are welcome without becoming Jews.

And that was the end of our time of cohabitation.

Christians left. Jews were mainly happy to see them go, sometimes asked them to leave. It was 50–60 C.E.

By now Christians had a foothold in many cities.

They had maintained the practice of gathering on the Sabbath. Their Friday evening gatherings were in homes, secretly, as Rome increasingly cast a skeptical eye on them.

Their ritual was partly Jewish Sabbath and now partly a reenactment of Jesus' Last Supper, when he broke bread and shared a cup and said, "This is my body; this is my blood."

Finally they moved the time to Sunday, the day of resurrection.

Three things happen

- 70 C.E.—Diaspora
- Separation between Jews and Christians becomes hostile sometimes; then something historically tragic: anti-Semitism, Christians blaming Jews for what happened to Jesus
- Roman persecution of Christians

A Time Line

- 313 Constantine and Theodosius legalize Christianity and make it the official religion of the empire.
- Rome collapses; Christianity is the only structure left; as historian Roland Bainton notes, "Out of ashes of Rome grew the Papacy, the Medieval church."
- Middle Ages—important for Christians and Jews
  - Jews dispersed, hanging on to tradition of Torah, often persecuted
  - Consolidation of real power in the church
  - The Age of Faith
    - Cathedrals
    - Universities
    - Church dominates
- Fast-forward to sixteenth-century Reformation (helpful to understand that the Protestant Reformation had several branches)
  - Lutheran, Martin Luther 1517—German
  - Reformed/Presbyterian, John Calvin 1530–50, Geneva
  - Anabaptist: Baptists, Mennonites, Methodism
  - Episcopalian, Anglican, England, Henry VIII
  - Each different in theology, style, worldview; difficult to generalize
    - All Protestants reject ("Protest") Papal authority.
    - Reformation associated with and part of new, radical notion that authority, political and ecclesiastical, starts bottom up, not top down.
    - Medieval Catholicism a perfect expression of reigning political theology, top down: God, Pope, Cardinals, Bishops, Clergy, Laity
    - Luther broke with Pope
    - Calvin radicalized Lutheranism
    - Power to people to elect both clergy and political leaders
    - His ideas got him in trouble in France.
    - Settled in Geneva, transformed it, both church and government
- Basic Calvinism/Presbyterian
    - Authority and power to people
    - Elected representatives
    - Emphasis on education (people have rights)
    - Sanctity of individual conscience
    - Worship as an act of the people (not simply clergy)
    - Faith is world-oriented, always political and economic implications

- Colonials were Calvinists
- Presbyterian involvement in Declaration of Independence
- Largest colonial church
- Today, 2.5 million in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 8 million adherents
- Southern Baptist is largest Protestant body, then Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian.
- 80 million Presbyterians worldwide
    - Reformed Church, RCA, CRC
    - Church of Scotland
    - Reformed Church of Hungary
    - Czech Republic
    - Korea—huge
    - Sudan, Kenya
    - Mission—education, health care

Characteristics of Contemporary Presbyterianism

- Take the world seriously, live thoroughly in the world
- Concern for justice, peace, human need
- Orderly participatory worship
- Education
- World orientation keeps Presbyterians involved and always in trouble

Common Ground

One of the precious gifts Judaism has given the world is the idea that creation is good, that human beings are created in the image of God and have the very breath or spirit of God in them, and that therefore human life is sacred and human beings are to be respected and honored and celebrated. Scholars understand the extraordinary witness of Jewish history, in which somehow, incredibly, through wars and exile and persecution and pogroms, in the most appallingly cruel and inhuman circumstances, Jews have remembered and celebrated the goodness of life.

At our best we Christians have remembered that gift given to us by our parents in faith. At our best we have honored the original covenant with God no less than the covenant we experience in Jesus Christ. At our best, and we have by no means always been at our best, we have honored, respected, defended, fought, and worked for the worth and dignity of every individual.

At our best we have joined hands with our Jewish neighbors, Jewish brothers and sisters, to make the life of our society more human, more just, more compassionate.

These are not easy times for Jews and Christians, particularly Presbyterian Christians, who wish to be in relationship with one another. It has not been

easy to talk with one another about the matter of Israel and Palestine. We have irritated and angered one another because of our deep feelings and convictions.

Even though it is not the topic this evening, I believe the current situation requires that I address it briefly.

I want to make a few simple points.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a body that is elected to represent the whole Presbyterian church, all 2-1/2 million of us. We do not all agree with our General Assembly. We do not have to. At the heart of our faith is a respect for the individual conscience. So, when it comes to controversial matters like Palestine and Israel, we are not of one mind.

When a General Assembly decides to begin a process of selected, staged divestment from companies whose business in Israel is deemed harmful to Palestinian and Israeli people, it is not a blanket divestment from all corporations who do business in Israel; it is not an attack on the Israeli economy; it is not an economic boycott.

We appreciate that the decision of our General Assembly has caused hurt and pain and anger, and it is important for us to say that the decision is not aimed at Israel or Israel's right to exist but at policies and practices that, to us, seem to be moving away, not toward, the reconciliation and peace everybody agrees the region, the people, the world, desperately need.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has stood strongly on the side of Israel's right to exist in safety and security since the founding of Israel. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has also stood strongly for the right of the Palestinian people to have a safe and secure state of their own behind internationally recognized borders.

We regret that some of our Jewish brothers and sisters experience our criticism of Israeli policy as an attack on Israel, or worse, as anti-Semitism. It is neither. This congregation and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will do everything possible and then some to help heal wounds and bridge divisions that may exist between us.

The problem is that Presbyterians, Protestants, in a sense all Christians, have difficulty, I believe, with Jewish focus on land as part of the faith. We know the stories, of course—the Abrahamic promise, the Exodus and Conquest, the Kingdom, the Monarchy, the Exile and Return, the Diaspora—but Presbyterians, with a very different social and political history, don't

always get it when our Jewish friends experience criticism of the State of Israel as an attack on Judaism or, worse, as anti-Semitic.

We think it is what it is, a criticism of a nation-state's behavior, not an attack on a religion or a people, for that matter. Part of the reason is that we never had a land that was important to our identity and our religion. We think our God-given task is to keep religion and state apart and that we are supposed to criticize the state when we believe it is wrong.

So we don't always get it. We never had a Holocaust either or pogroms aimed at Presbyterians; we were never ghettoized, discriminated against, kept out of clubs and universities and jobs because we were Presbyterian. And we do not have a historic paradigm of a holy land. So be patient with us as we struggle to learn, as I have done recently, how a criticism of Israeli policy is experienced as a personal attack.

From our perspective, our criticism of Israeli policy is not declaring warfare on Israel—as a local Jewish spokesperson described it—it is what it is.

From the beginning, the deepest, most difficult issue of all has been the issue of our basic relationship. Is Christianity a replacement of Judaism? The fulfillment, extension? Or are we completely separate religions? Paul asks the question, Has God cancelled the covenant God made with Abraham? Paul can't bring himself to say that. "Has God rejected his people? By no means!" (Romans 11:1). "They are beloved. . . . The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29).

Some Christians have always concluded that God's covenant with Israel has been cancelled, replaced, superseded by a new covenant with the Christian church in Jesus Christ and that Jews need to become Christians in order to receive God's gift of salvation. I do not agree with that. I do not believe Paul would agree with it.

I believe Paul would call Jews to be faithful Jews and Christians to be faithful followers of Jesus and for both to trust a good and merciful God who is the creator of all, a God who chooses people, elects people, commissions people—not for special privilege, certainly not for religious superiority, but for service, to be a light to the world. Paul is clear: "The gifts of God and the call of God are irrevocable." The covenant remains. I believe that Christians share that covenant, share the gift of God's mercy and grace that we experience in Jesus Christ, and share the responsibility. We do not replace it. We are family. We are from the same root. We, Paul says, are a later graft, but now we are part of God's redeeming activity in the world.

I do not believe Jews need to become Christians in order to receive the grace and mercy and love, the unconditional and eternal love of God.

Yale professor David Bartlett says that Jews and Christians each have a share in God's plan to redeem and restore creation. We are both messianic people; we both believe history is moving toward a fulfillment and will one day be complete. Theologian Douglas John Hall observes about the amazing presence of Jews in history in spite of persistent persecution, pogroms, holocausts, and evangelism crusades, "This small people sees itself being chosen for a large responsibility. But it does not fancy itself becoming large, important, powerful." The great contemporary writer Elie Wiesel was accurately reflecting the ancient concept of Jewish chosenness when, in an interview, he said, "As a Jew, I do not wish to make the world more Jewish, only more human" (*The Cross in our Context*, p. 190).

The world could use more of that. A few days after September 11, 2001, graffiti appeared on a wall standing near ground zero: "Dear God, Save us from people who believe in you." Another sign read: "Religion Kills."

And so, far more important than issues that divide us is a precious vision that Jews and Christians share and that lies at the very heart of both of our traditions —of a world at peace, a world in which human life is honored and respected and protected, a world in which justice is understood to be God's love in action, a world in which the weakest and smallest and most vulnerable are cared for.

We share that vision, and it is very precious and very critical.

And we Presbyterians should welcome every opportunity to reach out and join hands with Jewish neighbors, simply to stand together as custodians of this precious vision.

Christianity is my religion, my spiritual and cultural home. We share with Judaism and our Jewish neighbors a grounding in Scripture that we call Old or First Testament or Hebrew Scripture. We share a vision of God's purpose for creation, the just and peaceful world we call the kingdom of God. We share the ideal of respect extended to others of other faiths.

And we share, at the very heart of the matter, a belief and trust in one God, the God we Presbyterians know in Jesus Christ, the same God our Jewish neighbors know in scripture, history, Torah, and sacred ritual, a God of mercy and love, who calls us to live faithfully and in the joyful freedom of a love that will never let us, any of us, go.